

Book Review

Fagan, Jenni. (2012), *The Panopticon*. London: Windmill Books. 324 pp, ISBN-13: 9780099558644 ISBN: 0099558645, £7.99

The Panopticon by Edinburgh poet and writer Jenni Fagan is not for the faint hearted. It is a novel about a 15-year-old girl named Anais who is living in a residential care home on the outskirts of a large Scottish city, and Jenni Fagan has been very open about the fact that it draws on some of her experiences of being in residential care. As someone who has worked in residential care, I recognised in Anais so many of the young women I have met in residential units. She is fierce and at times frightening and yet incredibly vulnerable and traumatised from a lifetime of abuse and loss. She is smart and resilient and at the same time her behaviour can be erratic and extremely dangerous to herself and others. Anais is the narrator of her own story and the story includes flashbacks to key moments in her life, including the murder of her foster mother and the loss of her best friend. When we meet Anais she has just spent the night in the police cells after attacking a police officer. Anais cannot remember exactly what happened as she was under the influence of drugs and alcohol at the time. As she approaches the front door of the residential home she says, 'My heart's going. I've moved fifty-one fucking times now, but every time I walk through a new door I feel exactly the same - two years old and ready tae bite' (p. 9). For me this description of feeling 'two years old and ready tae bite' encapsulates the way that so many children who have been shunted around the care system from an early age must feel on the inside. Having missed out on early nurture, security and love, their inner world often resembles that of an angry, uncontained toddler, desperate for love and care but biting out in terror and fear of further rejection, abuse and loss.

In my view *The Panopticon* should be required reading for all social work students, residential care workers and foster carers. Anais has so much to teach all of us about what it is like to suffer abuse and loss, and to survive. Her insights into the failings of the care system and many of the professionals working in it are spot on, but very hard to read at times. Describing Eric, the student social worker, Anais says, 'Eric's relishing the power. He's on the lamest power trip in the world - the decider of how long it takes for me to get a tampon. Wow, Eric, the heady fucking heights your degree is taking you to!' (p. 73). The book is full of these unforgiving critiques of the professionals she is forced to have contact with. She is also unforgiving about the care environment itself. She hates the lack of privacy and the assumption that because she is in care even the most intimate details of her life are public knowledge. Explaining the regime in the new unit she says:

I heard they dinnae close the doors in here except after lights out. It's meant tae be good for us, ay. How is that good? Even from down here you can see bits of people's posters in their rooms, and a kid sitting on a bed, and one putting on his socks (p. 10).

The feeling of being watched and pursued permeates the book and there is a strong, surrealist influence here. At times it is hard to understand the meaning of Anais's dreams

and hallucinations but this seems to be part of the point. We are taken into Anais's inner world and it can be a strange and frightening place.

I have not stopped thinking about this book since I read it and it was very hard to read at times. Some of the things that happen to Anais are so horrendous it is hard to bear. But her story is always believable and, sadly, it reminds me of the stories of many the girls I have known in the care system. While I don't want to give away the plot I will say that although this story is devastatingly sad at times, it is also funny and uplifting and I felt that in the end, it was hopeful. Read it for yourself and see.

End Notes

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